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Chapter 3

The Discursive Denial of Racism by Finnish Populist Radical Right Politicians Accused of Anti-Muslim Hate-Speech



Katarina Pettersson

3.1 Introduction

The European Union has experienced turbulent times lately: it is being abandoned by Britain, one of its members since 1973; it has received more than one million refugees and asylum-seekers from war-laden countries in the Middle-East and Africa; and it has experienced multiple attacks of brutal terrorism. Concomitantly, so-called “established” political parties have seen their positions threatened by radical right wing political parties that have managed to appeal to the electorates with promises of a return to a nostalgic past of national and cultural unity and safety.

This chapter will look at one consequence of these happenings by delving into the context of Finland, in Europe’s Northeastern corner. The background of this study may be traced back to the autumn of 2015 when, due to the “refugee crisis”, Finland received more than 32,000 asylum-applications – a number ten times greater than during previous years. Like elsewhere in Europe, the Finnish public and political debate hardened, and hate-speech and hate-related crime rates rose with more than 50% during that year (Tihveräinen 2015). In the majority of cases, the hatred was directed at a particular group: Muslims.

Unlike many other European countries Finland, however, did not see a sudden rise in electoral support for populist radical right parties. The reason is simple: it had already happened. The Finns Party (*Perussuomalaiset/Sannfinländarna*) had risen from a marginal to a major political actor already through their remarkable triumph in the Finnish 2011 parliamentary elections. The success continued in the subsequent 2015 elections, when the party entered the national government for the first

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time. Thus, and even though the Finns Party had and still would manage to harden the Finnish asylum-policy, the party was regarded responsible for the management of the 2015 crisis, and consequently saw its voters abandon it.

The Finns Party was never a unanimously xenophobic party, but rather, it was divided into two camps. Its “moderate” faction, led by the party’s popular and charismatic leader Timo Soini, carried on the legacy of its predecessor the Finnish Rural Party (*Suomen maaseudun puolue/Finlands landsbygdsparti*), claiming to stand up for the “vulnerable”, ordinary people. Its more radical faction, championed by the internationally (in)famous Jussi Halla-aho, was outspokenly hostile towards immigration and multiculturalism in general, and the influence of Islam, in particular, and set a “return” to a homogeneous nation-state at the forefront of the party’s agenda. In June 2017 the Finns Party elected Halla-aho as party-leader, with the consequence that the party split into two: the Halla-aho-led Finns Party, on the one hand, and the “Soini-faithful” Blue Future (*Sininen tulevaisuus/Blå framtid*), on the other.

During the twenty-first century, members of Halla-aho’s faction of the Finns Party have been involved in racist scandals, and many have been charged and convicted of criminal hate-speech against Muslims (Finnish Broadcasting Company 2017). The Finns Party leadership had long been in an uncomfortable position in terms of how to handle such cases: on the one hand, it had to maintain its distance from racist crimes, but on the other, it had to keep satisfied the significant proportion of its supporters that voted precisely for the party’s radical members (Horsti 2015). When responding to accusations of racism in the media, the party displayed an ambivalent stance on racism, combining submissive and confrontational strategies, thus striving to please their moderate as well as their radical voters (Hatakka et al. 2017; Norocel et al. 2018).

The present chapter approaches the intriguing position of the Finns Party (at the time it was still one unified party) and racist hate-speech, by looking at how three of its members who were prosecuted for hate-speech against Muslims during the “refugee crisis” accounted for their actions. Analyzing the Facebook-accounts of these politicians, this chapter asks whether and how they sought to deny that they had incited to racial hatred. In so doing, it pays special attention to the ways in which the concepts of hope and nostalgia, on the one hand, and arguments related to Finnish culture and welfare, on the other, are used as discursive resources in these accounts.

3.2 The Denial of Racism in Radical Right Political Rhetoric

Social scientific research has paid considerable attention to the topic of discursive denials of racism. In her analyses of a television interview with the Austrian radical right Freedom Party leader H. C. Strache’s talk about an anti-Semitic caricature he had posted on his Facebook page, Ruth Wodak (2015) identified four strategies whereby Strache sought to deny that his post was anti-Semitic. These ways of racism-denial involved, first, the argument that since he had Israeli friends of his own, he cannot be anti-Semitic; second, the shifting of blame to others through

claims that someone else had distorted the original caricature; third, an “act-denial”, that is, the denial that the caricature actually contained visible references to Jews; and fourth, that the accusations against him were actually the product of a witch-hunt on behalf of a conspiracy of political antagonists. As Wodak shows, these strategies fulfilled their purpose efficiently, as they distracted attention away from the topic of anti-Semitism, and as Strache was, in the end, freed of charges.

Research on anti-immigration political rhetoric in various country-contexts has identified rhetorical strategies that aim to protect the speaker from charges of holding racist views (see, Augoustinos and Every 2007; Billig 1988; Capdevila and Callaghan 2008). Because of societal taboos against blatant expressions of prejudice (Billig 1988), politicians are forced to come up with means of formulating views that are hostile towards ethnic or cultural minorities in ways that nevertheless allow the speakers to appear rational and non-biased.

As the example of Strache illustrates, self-defensive discursive strategies (van Dijk 1993) that protect the speaker from accusations of holding racist views are of crucial importance in the context of politics, where arguments are expressed precisely in order for the speaker to come across as trustworthy and informed, and for the sake of persuading potential voters. A classic rhetorical strategy is to disclaim racism by preceding negative views against immigrants or minorities with statements like “I am not racist, but...” (van Dijk 1992). As research for example in the UK (Goodman and Johnson 2014; Wood and Finlay 2008), France (van Dijk 1993) and Sweden and Finland (Sakki and Pettersson 2016) has shown, such denials of racism may become by further extension *reversals* thereof (van Dijk 1993). This entails that the speaker accuses immigrants and minorities of racism towards the majority population; or political antagonists – typically left-wingers – of having abandoned “the people” in favor of multicultural agendas, thus de facto succumbing to racism towards this people. Not only does such talk allow the speakers to deny and reverse racism, but also to rhetorically position themselves as “protectors” of and speaking on behalf of this “forsaken people”, and providing them hope amidst the alleged threats of multiculturalism and immigrants.

Further self-defensive discursive strategies include those that seek to give a “factual”, objective connotation to the given arguments. This can be done, for example, through *empiricist discourse* (Potter 1996) that establishes the nature of a claim as based upon external facts, rather than (potentially biased) personal convictions. Radical right politicians oftentimes refer to “common-sense knowledge” (Billig 1987; Capdevila and Callaghan 2008; Lynn and Lea 2003), to external “facts” and prevailing consensus (Augoustinos et al. 2002; Potter 1996; Verkuyten 2001), or to factors unrelated to issues of race and ethnicity, such as economic ones (Augoustinos et al. 1999) when justifying negative stances towards immigrants and ethnic minorities. Resistance to immigration may, for example, be warranted by depicting immigrants and asylum-seekers as entailing an excessive strain on society or exploiting the welfare system (see, Cinpoş and Norocel Chap. 4, Hellström and Tawat Chap. 2 in this volume; Hellström and Pettersson 2020; Mudde 2007; Pettersson 2017).

Another central feature of contemporary radical right political rhetoric is its *de-racialization* (Augoustinos and Every 2007), that is, the discursive removal of

notions of race from this rhetoric. In such talk, rather than attributing positive versus negative features to different groups of people based upon their race, discriminatory practices towards immigrants or minorities can be warranted through arguments related to *the nation* (Reicher and Hopkins 2001; Wodak and van Dijk 2000) or to *cultural differences* (Every and Augoustinos 2007; Richardson and Colombo 2014; Verkuyten 2013). The speaker may appeal to the protection of national borders and preservation of a national identity of “the people” (van Dijk 1993; Wodak and van Dijk 2000) in order to justify restrictions on immigration and asylum-seeking. As is discussed throughout this book, such nationalist political rhetoric has surged in Europe since the 2015 refugee (reception) crisis.

Discourses where notions of race are replaced with references to *cultural* incompatibilities are illustrative of contemporary anti-Islamic discourse, where a juxtaposition is created between the “liberal, tolerant and democratic” Western, Christian or European cultures, on the one hand, and the “oppressive, intolerant and authoritarian” Islam, on the other. Such *cultural essentialist* discourse implies that since these differences are inherent, *essential* characteristics of cultures, they cannot be overcome, thus the co-existence of Western and Islamic values is by default impossible (Verkuyten 2013). This kind of talk allows the speakers to dodge accusations of racism or intolerance, first, because they may thus place themselves as explicit defenders of benevolent, liberal values (Wetherell and Potter 1992), and second, because criticism is directed at an abstract target: at Islam as a culture and ideology, not at individual Muslims (Richardson and Colombo 2014; Verkuyten 2013; Wood and Finlay 2008).

Taken together, the self-defensive discursive strategies described above, and the replacement of notions of race with talk of national protection and cultural differences, serve to construct the speaker as informed, logical and unbiased, and immigrants and asylum-seekers as deviant, inferior and/or undeserving Others (Capdevila and Callaghan 2008; van Dijk 1993). To further consolidate this positive self-presentation, the speakers may present themselves as representing “the common people” (Mudde 2007; Pettersson 2017; Rapley 1998), protecting them and their rights from external (or internal) threats. As discussed above, the “other”, that is, political antagonists, in turn, becomes accused of racism and elitism, and of having abandoned the nation and its “rightful” people in favor of immigrants and nefarious multicultural projects (see also Nissen, Chap. 6 in this volume). Such “us and them” constructions and switching of the racist label may serve particularly efficiently to portray the self as virtuous and the other as evil.

The majority of discursive work on radical right and racist political rhetoric has focused on its occurrence on party websites, in political speeches and programs, and traditional media outlets such as newspapers or television. Although the list of exceptions is growing (Burke and Goodman 2012; Pettersson and Sakki 2017) there is still a shortage of discursive research exploring radical right discourse within the sphere of the social media. Given the importance that this sphere has played for the electoral fortunes of the radical right, not least in the Nordic region (Hatakka 2017; Horsti 2015; Keskinen 2013) this is a topic that arguably needs attention. Utilizing radical right politicians’ writings in the social media as empirical material entails

distinct benefits: unlike in the case of interviews, this sort of “naturally occurring” material allows the researcher to analyze discourse that the politicians have produced independently, without the involvement of journalists or researchers (Potter and Hepburn 2005). Studying politicians’ writings in social media channels also makes it possible to analyze discourse that connects the politicians with their readership, and that thus constitutes an important vehicle for politicians to engage presumptive voters into political participation and debate (Baumer et al. 2011; Pettersson 2017).

This chapter aims to build upon the stream of research outlined above by exploring the ways in which three Finns Party politicians prosecuted for hate-speech against Muslims seek in their Facebook accounts to deny their guilt of racist hatred. A further aim is to relate the Finnish populist radical right politicians’ strategies of denying racism towards Muslims to previous research findings, especially those of Wodak (2015) regarding the Austrian radical right party leader’s denials of anti-Semitism, hoping that such a comparison may inform us about the context and type-specific versus global character of racism denials.

The chapter approaches the topic relying on work in critical discursive psychology (CDP) (Edley 2001; Wetherell 1998). The approach has its roots in the social constructionist paradigm (Burr 2003; Gergen 2009), which views reality as continuously constructed by human beings in social contexts and through social practices. CDP is a research approach that draws inspiration from both discursive (Potter and Wetherell 1987) and rhetorical (Billig 1987) psychology. CDP views the concept of discourse as a production of its historical and societal contexts (Edley 2001), as well as of its particular argumentative context, that is, it pays attention to the alternative views that the discourse is arguing against (Billig 1987). Moreover, the perspective takes into account the social and political consequences that the discursive patterns might have (Wetherell 1998). Thus, CDP allows for the critical examination of discourse at both an immediate argumentative and a broader societal level. I find the approach particularly useful for the purposes of the present study: to explore the rhetorical means whereby the Finns Party politicians accused of racist hate-speech sought to deny these accusations, and, finally, what these denials aimed to achieve in a social and political sense.

3.2.1 *The Present Cases*

The Finnish constitution does not recognize hate-speech as such as a criminal act, but persons found guilty of incitement to racial hatred or breach of the sanctity of religion may be punished with a fine or prison sentence of up to 2 years, and 6 months, respectively (Finnish Criminal Code Chapter 11, Sections 10–11). At the time of writing, since 2004 forty-two people had been charged with such criminal hate-speech (Finnish Broadcasting Company 2017). Six of these, that is, one in seven, had been members of the Finns Party. This chapter explores three such cases that received massive public and media attention: those of Terhi Kiemunki, Teuvo

Hakkarainen and Sebastian Tynkkynen. Terhi Kiemunki was at the time of her case head of the Finns Party local branch in Tampere, Finland's third biggest city, and assistant to a party Member of Parliament (MP). Kiemunki had already been publicly criticized because of her blog-writing comparing Muslim girls to witches. Hakkarainen is an MP, well known for his radical statements and involvement in racist scandals. In turn, Tynkkynen is the (now former) president of the Finns Party Youth organization, a very active and similarly radical political debater, who has become known not only for his severe criticism of Islam, but also for his vocal disapproval of the Finns Party's previous leadership.¹

The three politicians were charged for their writings about Muslims in the social media – on Facebook in the case of Hakkarainen and Tynkkynen, and in her blog in the case of Kiemunki. Hakkarainen and Tynkkynen wrote their statements in July 2016, shortly after the terrorist attack in Nice, where a man of North-African origin drove a truck into a crowd, killing 86 people. Hakkarainen was charged with incitement to racial hatred because of his writings claiming: “not all Muslims are terrorists, but all terrorists are Muslim”. Tynkkynen had compared the prophet Mohammed to a monster and called for the “return-mill” to start turning and removing all Muslims from Finland. The court found him guilty incitement to racial hatred and breach of the sanctity of religion. Kiemunki had been sentenced for incitement to racial hatred because of her blog-entry written in March 2016, where she had drawn an image of a future Finland where women and children are raped, “heathens” killed and mosques erected because of an Islamic invasion. None of the three politicians were expelled from the Finns Party because of their sentences,² despite the then-party-leader Timo Soini's earlier promise that this would be the fate of any member who engages in racist activities.

3.2.2 *Material and Method*

The material for this study consists of Facebook-entries by Kiemunki, Hakkarainen and Tynkkynen during the months following their statements that had rendered them convicted of criminal hate-speech. The time-period stretches from March 2016 to February 2017, covering the time preceding, during, and following the politicians' trials. I selected the accounts for analysis on the basis that they involved the topic of hate-speech, racism and/or the politicians' individual cases, ending up with 38 accounts. Given the study's critical discursive psychological approach that combines both “micro” and “macro” perspectives on discourse, I went beyond the

¹ In the 2019 Finnish national parliamentary elections, Tynkkynen gained a seat in parliament. Later that year, he was again prosecuted for incitement to racial hatred.

² In February 2017, well after her involvement in the racist scandals, Kiemunki was expelled from the Finns Party, officially because of her “unclear financial affairs”. However, Kiemunki continued her political activities in the party at local level. Tynkkynen and Hakkarainen have remained within Halla-aho's Finns Party since the party split in June 2017.

material when conducting my analyses, taking into account the potential counter-arguments that the politicians sought to argue against in their discourse (Billig 1987).

My analytical procedure involved three distinct, yet intertwined stages (see: Sakki and Pettersson 2016). First, I thoroughly read the material multiple times in order to identify the *consistency* and *variability* within and between accounts in the material (Potter and Wetherell 1987). In accordance with my research interest, the patterns I sought for were the ways in which the politicians talked about racism in their Facebook-accounts. I paid special attention to the accounts wherein the politicians constructed their own positions vis-à-vis racism, distancing themselves from it. Second, I set out to explore in detail how these different versions of racist hate-speech and the concomitant denials thereof were constructed. Here, I relied on the analytical toolkit of discursive (Potter 1996; Potter and Wetherell 1987) and rhetorical (Billig 1987, 1988) psychology, striving to identify the discursive and rhetorical strategies that the politicians utilized in their denials of racism. Third, acknowledging that individuals in general – and politicians in particular – strive with their rhetoric to achieve certain actions (Billig 1987; Potter 1996), I analyzed the Facebook-accounts as part of their argumentative contexts. This entailed taking into account the broader social and political debate that the accounts sought to participate in, and importantly, what counter-positions they sought to refute. This stage involved the critical evaluation of what the politicians' discourse about racism might achieve in a social and political sense.

3.3 Analysis: Four Ways of Denying Racist Hatred

Through my analyses of the politicians' Facebook accounts I identified four dominant ways in which the speakers sought to defend themselves against accusations of racist hate-speech. Through providing illustrative examples, I aim in the detailed analyses below to demonstrate the intricate rhetorical ways in which the politicians accomplished these self-defenses.

3.3.1 *Empiricist Discourse: "Facts, Common Sense"*

The first way in which the politicians sought to deny that their statements about Muslims had been racist was to describe them, not as personal opinions, but as undisputable "facts", as in the first two extracts below wherein Kiemunki (explicitly) and Tynkkynen (implicitly) discuss their respective cases:

Extract 3.1: Kiemunki, 28 November 2016

1 Next Thursday the District Court will give its view on whether this text
2 is criminal hate-speech. If the District Court sees that it is, I will take
3 the matter to the Court of Appeal. During these current times, each of
4 you can think about: can the truth be condemned?

Extract 3.2: Tynkkynen, 24 January 2017

1 In Finland serious security-problems and the warranted concerns they
2 cause among the citizens are dealt with through empty words, by
3 encouraging children to denounce their parents' wrong kind of talk,
4 and by bringing FB-accounts to court.
5 That is not the right way. It is an untenable way, where the true
6 problem is ignored and thereafter censored. Now I won't speak of
7 those true problems, because the nice-speech network has been
8 intelligent enough to manage to define a price and criminal label for
9 the expression of opinions. Next time I have money I will talk about
10 those real problems that should be dealt with.

In both extracts above, the speakers exploit what Potter (1996) has called an *empiricist repertoire*: they present their claims as based upon objectively and collectively recognized matter-of-facts, rather than on any personal, potentially biased opinions. In Extract 3.1, the speaker uses *factual language*, maintaining that her writings had merely stated the truth (line 4). This claim is phrased in the form of a rhetorical question directed at the readership, which in the present context allows the politician's discursive self-defense to become co-constructed together with the readers. As has been shown elsewhere (Pettersson and Sakki 2017; Sakki and Pettersson 2016) this kind of collaborative talk is a specific affordance of the social media (e.g., blogs and Facebook) that allows politicians to increase a sense of mutual understanding and togetherness with the readership.

Extract 3.2 was written by Tynkkynen after he had received his sentence. He constructs his writings as statements of "true problems". Through consensual formulations (1–2) he depicts these problems as widely recognized concerns among the Finnish people, warranting why they should be discussed and dealt with. Tynkkynen accuses the "nice-speech network",³ that is, those who support his sentence, of having done their utmost to silence voices of truth like his own (7–10), thus constructing these antagonists as unjust and himself as unjustly treated. Furthermore, we can see that Tynkkynen uses his sentence (a fine) as a self-defensive discursive tool: through an ironic and martyred tone, he concludes that he cannot this time afford to comment upon the "true problems"; that is, the alleged threat that Muslims

³In Finnish, the word "kivapuhe" is an anagram of the word for hate-speech, "vihapuhe". This word was launched by the Finnish police as part of their campaign to combat hate-speech and is here ironically referred to by Tynkkynen.

entail to Finland (9–10), a formulation that consolidates his position as an innocent martyr and truth-teller.

To summarize, in displaying the politicians' statements as mere descriptions of undisputable facts and common-sense (Billig 1987), the empiricist repertoire in Extracts 3.1 and 3.2 above protects the politicians from charges of holding prejudiced views, and thus, serve to deny that the writings reveal any racist intentions. Put differently, it creates the impression that their sentences had been highly unwarranted.

3.3.2 *Narrative and Gerrymandering the Terrain: "Own Black Friends"*

A second way in which the politicians sought to distance themselves from racism was by referring to their own black friends. This discourse echoes that demonstrated by Wodak (2015) in her analyses of Strache's denials of anti-Semitism, as illustrated in Extract 3.3 below:

Extract 3.3: Tynkkynen, 30 September 2016

- 1 From my perspective people coming to our country wanting death
- 2 penalty for homosexuals is no "who cares" issue. It is also not a
- 3 question of skin-color, since as I have noted before, my best friend has
- 4 dark skin.

In this extract, the politician discusses his upcoming trial, and accounts for his motivations for the statements about Muslims for which he was sentenced. Earlier in the Facebook-entry from which this extract derives, Tynkkynen had mentioned his own bisexuality, an identity he often makes explicit when publicly warranting his suspicion of Islamic ideology that, according to Tynkkynen, entails a lethal danger to sexual minority members. In the present context, indeed, through constructing his own previous statements against Muslims as the worries of a vulnerable minority-group member (1–2), such statements seem much better founded. Further, Tynkkynen chooses to refer to his own black friend as "living proof" of the impossibility of him being racist: a racist person could not, the reasoning goes, have black friends of his own. The extract above provides an illustrative example of how racism can be denied through a personal narrative that strategically *gerrymanders the discursive terrain* (Potter 1996), that is, that carefully selects which aspects of the self to emphasize and which ones to leave out in order to draw attention away from the topic of hate-speech against Muslims. In this way, Tynkkynen is able to construct his statements as the legitimate worries of a threatened minority-member with a multiracial friend group, not those of a radical right politician that actively resists the presence of Muslims in Finland.

3.3.3 *Discursive Deracialization: Talk About Culture and the Nation*

In line with what research on the discursive deracialization of radical right political rhetoric has shown, contemporary Islamophobic statements are typically warranted through depicting Islam and Christian or “Western” values as inherently incompatible (Verkuyten 2013). Indeed, the politicians in the present study exploited such talk of cultural differences in order to warrant their anti-Muslim views, as illustrated in Extracts 3.4 and 3.5 below:

Extract 3.4: Hakkarainen, 20 December 2016

- 1 Islamists don’t accept the festivities of us infidels. This is again an
- 2 indication of how much they value and respect our Western way of life.
- 3 Is it hate-speech if one expresses one’s opinion about their actions?

Extract 3.5: Tynkkynen, 14 October 2016

- 1 Hate-speech and incitement or not, one cannot keep silent about these
- 2 things [referring to a case in which a man of Iraqi origin was suspected
- 3 of rape of a Finnish woman]. I’ll bombard, until I hit. In some countries,
- 4 a woman’s life is not worth as much as a man’s. Here in Oulu [speaker’s
- 5 home city] our women become the victims of the horrendous
- 6 multicultural experiment. Islam and respect for women fit very poorly
- 7 together.

In Extracts 3.4 and 3.5 above, the speakers draw an image of Islam as not only incompatible with, but in fact threatening to “our way of life”, due to its implied inherent violent (Extract 3.4) and misogynist (Extract 3.5) nature. Extract 3.4 was written shortly after the terrorist attack in Berlin in December 2016, when a man of Tunisian origin drove a truck into a Christmas market, killing twelve people. The speaker uses this example to justify his claim that critique of Islam must be allowed. In this extract – as in the statement that caused his sentence – Hakkarainen smoothly places radical Islamists and Muslims in the same category. This serves to homogenize the violent behavior of terrorists to represent a threat posed by the entire Muslim community, thus discursively warranting and deracializing criticism of the latter group (Sakki and Pettersson 2016; Wood and Finlay 2008). Moreover, and resembling Extract 3.1 above, the speaker uses a rhetorical question (3) through which the meaning of the message becomes constructed together with his readership (Sakki and Pettersson 2016).

The speaker in Extract 3.5, in turn, uses another classic version of cultural essentialist discourse: he claims that Islam is inherently oppressive of women, and should therefore be resisted (see also Edenborg, Chap. 7 in this volume). The speaker makes use of metaphorical language, emphasizing that regardless of the personal risk involved (1), he will continue his “bombardment” of Islam (3) in order to

protect “our” women from the dangers of multiculturalism, expressed through the extreme-case formulation (Pomerantz 1986) “horrendous”. As previous research (Mols and Jetten 2014) has shown, metaphors of struggle and battle between liberal, democratic values, on the one hand, and authoritarian ones, on the other, may serve to create an air of urgency and threat, emphasizing the need to protect the vulnerable in-group from the dangerous out-group. In this way, the politician manages to present himself as a true and brave defendant of women’s rights; in contrast to Islam, and implicitly, in contrast to those who favor multiculturalism (Keskinen 2013). This leads me to the final way in which the politicians in this study sought to deny racism: through reversing it.

3.3.4 *The Reversal of Racism*

As Teun van Dijk (1993) has proposed, perhaps the strongest way of denying racism is to “reverse” it by accusing “the other” of racism. An illustrative example of such discourse is provided in Extract 3.6 below by Kiemunki:

Extract 3.6: Kiemunki, 23 November 2016

1 What makes a person become as full of hatred and bad feelings as the
2 so-called “anti-racists” and the “tolerant” seem to be? Someday, when
3 I have time, I will make a collage of texts that I myself would call hate-
4 speech. It has never occurred to me to use such language about anyone,
5 and I hope these people won’t be met with hatred, because they rather
6 need instant help to get rid of their tormenting emotions and
7 misanthropy.

In the extract above, in order to remove her guilt of racist hate-speech, Kiemunki refers to cases that, in her own view, fulfil the criteria of such speech. Stating that she will make a collage of these statements (3–4), Kiemunki makes a discursive maximization (Potter 1996), implying that these accusations exist *en masse*. Through a contrast structure (Gill 2000/2010) between such and her own language (4–6) the politician manages to construct herself as truly innocent, in contrast to the “opponents of racism” and the “tolerant” that, ergo, are practicing racist hate-speech on a regular basis. In the context of (radical right) politics the strategy of reversing racism is especially powerful, as it removes the racist label commonly attached to the politician’s own party and instead attaches it to their political opponents, whose alleged “anti-racism” thus becomes discursively rebutted (Sakki and Pettersson 2016).

Before finishing with some concluding remarks, let us turn to one final example, written by the same politician as in Extract 3.6 above. As we shall see, the extract below provides a conglomerate of the ways of denying racism outlined above, and adds further dimensions to them:

Extract 3.7: Kiemunki, 20 August 2016

1 Those living in the red-green bubble and calling themselves tolerant
 2 label people racist when they imagine that they don't tolerate or that
 3 they even hate every person who has even a partial foreign background
 4 or darker skin-color. Maybe such people exist, but I have not met a
 5 single one. For most people, including myself, it is a matter of (a) an
 6 intolerant and oppressive religion and culture that I don't want to get
 7 power, (b) young men who invade the country on false and wrong
 8 grounds, and ruthlessly abuse our social system, demanding and
 9 complaining, (c) the financial situation of our country and the fact that
 10 we cannot even take care of our own weakest ones, and instead take
 11 debts that coming generations will pay, and that we now use to provide
 12 a living for impostors who leave the truly distressed – children, elderly
 13 people and women – in the midst of war, (d) the Europe-wide security-
 14 threat, terrorism, violent criminality and rapes.

The speaker in Extract 3.7 begins her statement with a powerful reversal of racism (van Dijk 1993), wherein she accuses the “allegedly tolerant people”, metaphorically living in a red-green bubble (line 1) of irrationality (line 2) and anti-white hatred and discrimination (see Nissen, Chap. 6 in this volume; Sakki and Pettersson 2016; Wood and Finlay 2008). The politician implicitly includes herself in this victimized category, whose innocence she insists upon by emphasizing that she has never even met a racist person (4). In what follows, the politician discursively denies racism through cultural essentialist arguments (5–6) (Verkuyten 2013) and categorical generalizations (Every and Augoustinos 2007) about Muslims (7–9) and Islam entailing a threat to Finnish and European security (13–14). Further, the speaker draws upon a common stereotype in radical right discourse, referring to immigrants and asylum-seekers as a homogeneous category of “bogus” young men, who are only here to exploit the system (Norocel et al. 2018; Pettersson and Sakki 2017).

An explicit juxtaposition is made between “our people”, the vulnerable, and these “external intruders”, who are acting as parasites upon the Finnish welfare system and economic resources that, the politician contends, should be reserved for the Finnish people alone. Such welfare-chauvinist stances are indeed a common feature of radical right discourse (see Cinpoş and Norocel Chap. 4, Hellström and Tawat Chap. 2 in this volume; Mudde 2007; Norocel 2016; Sakki and Pettersson 2016) that allows the politicians to position themselves as speaking “on behalf of the people”, thus downplaying racist intentions when proposing discriminatory practices against “outsiders”. The speaker presents her arguments in the pseudo-scientific form of an abcd-list, and as widely shared (5), allowing her to come across as reasonable and informed (Potter 1996). Throughout this extract, the vast use of extreme-case formulations (Pomerantz 1986) such as “even hate every person” (3) and “ruthlessly abuse” (8), a rhetorically powerful dichotomy is created between the allegedly vulnerable, honest and non-racist “us”, the Finns, on the one hand, and “them”, political antagonists, on the other, who by engaging in anti-white racism and sanctioning the intrusion of the “dangerous and oppressive” Islam into Finland,

entails the true threat to the Finnish nation and its people. Having thus removed the racist label and attached it to her antagonists, the politician is able to claim the position of the true protector of the Finnish people and identity.

3.4 Conclusions

As demonstrated in the above analyses of the three Finns Party politicians' Facebook-entries, these politicians went through extensive rhetorical work in order to deny their guilt of racist hate-speech against Muslims. The analysis showed that the politicians did so in four distinct ways: first, through constructing their statements as the mere displaying of undisputable facts and common-sense (Billig 1987); second, through personal narratives and ontological gerrymandering (Potter 1996) that acted as "proof" of the politician's non-racist disposition; third, through transferring the discussion from issues about race to concern matters of cultural threats (Verkuyten 2013); and, fourth, through reversing racism to the politicians' political antagonists (van Dijk 1993). As Extract 3.7 showed, these strategies of racism denial were by no means isolated patterns, but could intermingle in the politicians' discourse, and be further strengthened by economic (Augoustinos et al. 1999) and welfare-chauvinist arguments (Mudde 2007; Norocel 2016).

As in particular Extracts 3.1 and 3.4 above illustrated, the specific context of the social media, in this case Facebook, allows the politicians to express these denials in ways in which they become the joint accomplishment of the politician and the readership. Allowing the readers to reach the conclusion about the politicians' innocence creates an air of mutual understanding, and functions in a powerful way to produce a sense of "us", the non-racist, against "them", who falsely accuse "us" of racism (Sakki and Pettersson 2016).

An interesting finding of the present study is that the denials of anti-Muslim hate-speech studied here bear notable similarities to the denials of anti-Semitism in the Austrian context (Wodak 2015). Specifically, the Finns Party politicians' accounts of their own black friends, and of their trials being nothing less than witch-hunts against them by their political opponents, echoed the rhetoric of the Austrian radical right party leader. Nevertheless, my findings also highlighted aspects that were not salient in Strache's denials of anti-Semitism, such as the vast use of an empiricist repertoire (Potter 1996) and of culturally essentialist arguments. Taken together, these findings indicate that the discursive denial of racism may very well have a transnational character, regardless of the target of this racism. Yet, it also does seem to vary as a function of this target, and importantly, of the specific argumentative context in which the denial takes place.

My analysis also indicates that the Finnish politicians' discursive denial of racist hate-speech against Muslims was primarily warranted through nostalgic references to Finnish national identity, people and values; and claims that the hope of saving these rests on resisting the cultural threat posed by Islam. This finding is in line with previous research that has highlighted the centrality of cultural essentialist arguments

in contemporary anti-Islamic (political) discourse (Richardson and Colombo 2014; Verkuyten 2013; Wood and Finlay 2008). Nonetheless, as the final Extract 3.7 demonstrated, such appeals could very well be intertwined with arguments about protecting the Finnish welfare system against intruding and undeserving “others” (Sakki and Pettersson 2016). It may be that denials of anti-Muslim hate-speech could rely more strongly on blending culture and welfare protectionist arguments for instance in the context of Sweden, where the notion of the “people’s home” – the Swedish welfare-model – is even more heavily intertwined with constructions of an essential “Swedishness” in radical right political rhetoric (Hellström and Pettersson 2020; Hellström and Tawat, Chap. 2 in this volume; Norocel 2016; Norocel et al. 2018). Along with the comparison between the present study and that of Wodak (2015) in the Austrian setting, this chapter is a reminder of the importance of examining political discourse that aims to warrant antagonistic juxtapositions between “us” and “them” in their specific social and historical context. Only in this manner may we unpack political talk whose potentially harmful consequences are concealed under veils of anti-racist rhetorical formulations.

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